

Sermon Ways of Meeting God # 1 - Contemplation Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Shadow Rock UCC, Phoenix, AZ Feb. 10, 2008, First Sunday of Lent, 2008 Scripture Matthew 4: 1-11

We are now in the season of Lent. These periods in the church, like alone with Advent, Christmas, Holy Week were established to help us remember the movement of God in the world. Just as we each have a birthday, a time to recall our birth, to celebrate our life here. Likewise, the church, and other religious traditions, established milestones for recalling events in their religious and cultural heritage. These allow us to re-connect with the source of life. For some this is called “Spirituality.”

There is a new movement in our religious history, called “Spirituality.” More and more people are looking for that which connects them to a deeper meaning and significance. Unfortunately “spirituality” has been narrowly defined using only disciplines like prayer and bible reading. In the recent survey that some 240 people took, there were questions related to “growing spiritually.” As I reviewed the questions and answers I was not surprised to learn that Shadow Rock scored lower than other churches. In fact, almost all UCC churches score low when “spirituality” is narrowly defined.

Last week, I offered three components to the work of the church

Contemplation

Compassion

Community

These three also comprise what can be defined as “Spirituality” or that which connects us to a deeper significance, meaning and dimension in our lives. They are also three ways to connect to God. Thankfully, we are not all alike individually or as churches. So each of us and each church have a way in which we connect with the Holy. This week and in the following two weeks, we will consider each of them individually.

We in the United Church of Christ affirm that God is still speaking. So, how is it that we hear, see, taste, feel, sense, intuit this God who is still speaking, this Holy Other which people are seeking to find?

Anthony DeMello, a Jesuit priest, teacher, spiritual director from India in his book, “Walking on Water” (page 23-24) tells the story that on one day God got tired of people. There were always pestering and asking for things. So for a short time God thought a vacation would be a good thing. Gathering all of the advisors, God asked, “Where should I hide? Where’s the best place for me to hide?”

Some said “Hide on the highest mountain peak” or “Hide at the bottom of the sea, they’d never find you there.” Others offered “Hide on the other side of the moon. How are they going to find you there?”

Then God turned to a most intelligent advisor and asked, “Where do you advise me to hide?” This wise advisor, smiled and said, “Go and hide yourself in the human heart. That’s the only place where they never go!”

So how is it that we experience God? In what ways can we connect? How is it that we can connect with our heart. In this sermon, I hope you will acquire several ways of doing so.

For most of us, we acquired our religious knowledge through our parents, friends, religious community, and events in our lives. There is now some speculation that people have a “religious or spiritual gene.” It is a process, a journey. There is no one way. Jesus also acquired it. In the reading for today, this event for Jesus was a major turning point. It was near the beginning of his ministry. Notice that he is responding to negativity with the knowledge that he has acquired from a variety of sources, particularly scripture.

WE LEARN FROM EVERYDAY LIFE AND EVENTS....

One of the first ways we learn about God, we connect with God is through every day life and events. This is why our early years are important. For many of us though, we connect with the divine through creation, through nature. Whether we are hiking, or viewing a sunset or sunrise, the aura of nature brings us to a place where we realize that perhaps there is more to life than ourselves, that there is something greater. This is “contemplation.” Another way is when we experience love, first as an infant, then as a teenager, and finally as an adult. This is “contemplation.” At the same time, there are difficult experiences which we would often time like to forget, let go, and never have experienced. Often we ask, “If there is a God, where is God at those horrendous events, like war, death, suffering. This also is “Contemplation.”

Jesus could very well have asked the same questions. In fact he did! He cried out, “my God, my God why have you forgotten me.” The psalms contain life experiences of the writers, from joy, praise and celebration to lamentations, anger, frustration and fear. That is why I encourage the reading of the Psalms.

In the Bible stories, like the temptation of Jesus we read this morning, are illustrations of other people who have experienced peaks and valleys, and reach out to the God who is still speaking, who may seem distant and unknowing. I’m sure the story of young Joseph, son of Jacob, despised by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold into slavery and taken to Egypt often wondered about God, particularly when he was unjustly accused of having an affair with the Queen and thrown into prison. We reflect and remember our life experiences and hopefully sense the movement of God in our lives.

2. CONNECT WITH GOD THROUGH PRAYER

For most of us, prayer is a way for us to connect with each other and with the Holy. The shortest prayer for petition is “Help.” A second short prayer is “Thank you.” There are so many different ways to pray. Often times, we get into a rut even praying what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” By using different words, as we did this morning, the prayer can become alive and real to us again. Using other written prayers, or reading the psalms which are both hymns and prayers, can lead us to a connection with God. Martin Luther said that he who sings, prays twice.

3. CONNECTION THROUGH SCRIPTURES, BOOKS

Lastly, reading scripture is a way to connect with God. Too often we read scripture for information instead of transformation. But scripture, and for that matter any novel, letter, poem, even music, can be read and heard for Transformation. There are three ways to experience this:

1. Spiritual Reading; in the history of Christian spirituality, the oldest and best known approach to Bible reading is called “spiritual reading” or divine reading. In actuality, it comes to us from the Hebraic tradition. The purpose is to listen deeply to the God who speaks through the Word, the Torah and prophets, and then to allow that Word to shape the appropriate response in thought, prayer, and the conduct of daily life.

In the Latin it is called, *Lectio Divina*. It has four components to it:

1. First read slowly, and wait for a word or phrase that jumps out at you. This is “lectio.”
2. When a word or phrase appears, stop! Meditate on it. Let it sink into your heart. For example, in our scripture this morning, the word “desert” could jump out. What kind of desert am I in now?
3. Then pray the text. Have dialogue with God! Oratio. In the case of the temptation story, the response could be a dialogue for guidance, strength, courage.
4. The last phase is “contemplatio.” That is “rest.”, we allow the text to work in us. We let it soak into our deepest being. We encounter God, God’s presence. God speak to us, transform us. The scripture becomes the living Word for you and you become a blessing to others.

2. One of my favorite ways of encountering stories of the Bible the St. Ignation method. This teaches us to actively enter into the story, especially with narrative material in which actual characters lived a story of faith. The idea is to place oneself into the text as a careful observer, a fly on the wall. We use our five senses in the scripture, our sight, smell, touch, hearing and feeling. We might even become one of the characters. The aim is to help us perceive the narrative from God’s viewpoint, and allow God to speak to you. When we read a novel and identify with a character, this is a way of entering into the novel.

3. For those who are more “mind-oriented” and “action-oriented” the St. Francis of Assisi method is helpful. This method focus on the qualities of Franciscan spirituality including action, spontaneity, love, praise, beauty and delight in creation. It allows the encounter with God to incorporate ordinary activities and daily experiences. For example, with Joseph, we might look through the newspaper and identify places in the world where there is deception, suffering, famine, and drought. One might write a poem or paint a picture to capture what one is thinking or feeling. Our emotions would be expressed through an activity.

There is no one way that we connect with the Mystery, with God, the Holy, Divine. Each of us is different, thank you very much. Some are more apt to meet God in working for justice, others in worship, music, the arts, while others in prayer, reading, movies, and silence.

This morning, we have learned more of how we connect with God through contemplation, in everyday life and in prayer and spiritual reading. Our God is not a separate entity, a pie in the sky, holy, other and separate. This mystery, ground of all being, desires relationship. There are ways we can cultivate the relationship. One way is through contemplation. Next week, we’ll look at compassion and service.

All of the ways though do ask us to pay attention. Remember the story of God hiding in your heart? Listen then, with the ear of your heart,

Be still, and know God,
Be still and know,
Be still,
Be.

Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving God, we pray this morning with simplicity. Help us to seek after your wisdom with hope and gentleness of pace.

Teach us to extend healing whenever we see tears of pain or signs of long endured sufferings.

Enable us to respond to needs by envisioning possibilities beyond the limitations of human systems and structures.

Urge us to catch the joy of fellowship and your Spirit's presence within our solitude.

Inspire us to solve insurmountable problems by an acceptance of grace.

Fill us with a reverence for life and a deep appreciation for our gifts, our faith, our future.

Be with us in our journey as individuals, as a church.

We lift up, and name now those special to us, in the joys and concerns of life that they and we experience...we name them now....

Bob, Karen,